



Executive Summary

**Independent Investigation for
Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle**

May 20, 2019

www.netgrace.org

I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In the spring of 2017, a local pastor informed Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle's¹ Senior Pastor of reported sexual abuse by Ron Braaten, a former SGT youth pastor and one of SGT's currently supported missionaries. After receiving additional information about this disclosure, SGT initiated an engagement with GRACE² to conduct this Independent Investigation. As described in the Engagement Agreement, GRACE was asked to investigate any and all allegations of sexual misconduct by Ron Braaten, including but not limited to, whether SGT had any knowledge of such allegations and if so, how SGT responded to such allegations.³

In order to evaluate these areas, GRACE created a confidential online survey which SGT made available on its website beginning on October 15, 2018.⁴ SGT also sent a letter with a link to the survey to approximately 300 individuals who attended SGT during the time Mr. Braaten was SGT's youth pastor and who could have relevant information regarding these matters.⁵ The purpose of the survey, the scope of the investigation, and definitions of abuse and misconduct⁶ were articulated at the beginning of the survey and each survey taker was required to acknowledge reading these instructions. The survey was accessed 228 times.⁷ GRACE conducted a total of 48 witness interviews⁸ from survey and non-survey participants, and collected and reviewed information voluntarily provided by SGT and by any witness with relevant information. Since this was not a legal proceeding and GRACE does not have subpoena or other powers, witnesses could not be compelled to speak, and all information and materials were voluntarily provided. Apart from witness testimony, the materials voluntarily provided included but were not limited to elder meeting minutes, emails between witnesses, social media messages, photographs, camp records, and law enforcement and counseling records.

In the pages that follow, GRACE first provides Investigative Findings regarding allegations of sexual misconduct by Mr. Ron Braaten, including how SGT responded (Part II), followed by Analysis (Part III), and Spiritual Impact and Conclusion (Part IV). GRACE also provides Recommendations related to these issues.

II. INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS

Jane Doe's Disclosures and the Nature of the Allegations

Jane Doe was introduced to the Braaten family in the beginning of her kindergarten year at Smithtown Christian School, where she attended in 1993. Jane Doe said she met Olivia Raye,⁹ one of Mr. Braaten's children, on the first day of school. At that time, Mr. Braaten served as SGT's youth pastor.¹⁰ The Braaten family lived in a house behind Smithtown Christian School. They would play together at school and after school in Olivia's yard, which

¹ Hereinafter referred to as SGT.

² Also known as Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment.

³ See Engagement Agreement signed by SGT and GRACE representatives in July 2018.

⁴ The survey link remained available on SGT's website throughout the duration of this investigation.

⁵ During the investigation, GRACE also provided the survey link to any person who expressed an interest in providing information.

⁶ The following definitions applied in the survey: "A survivor is any individual (regardless of age or gender) who is a victim of sexual misconduct. A child is a person 17 years of age or younger. An adult is a person 18 years of age or older. Misconduct is defined as any verbal, nonverbal and/or physical acts of an immoral, indecent, or sexual nature that are 1) unwelcome or 2) performed without consent or 3) committed by one in a position of authority upon a subordinate. 'Without consent' means that consent is not freely given or obtained, and is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, manipulation, coercion, threat, deception, or misuse of authority or power. Any person who is mentally or physically incapacitated is incapable of providing consent. Sexual abuse of a minor (a person 17 years of age or younger) is deemed to be without consent. The minor is considered unable to consent due to developmental immaturity and an inability to understand sexual behavior. An offender may perform acts involving sexual abuse against the minor, or the minor may be told, forced, or in any other way, the offender may cause the minor to engage in sexual behavior with the adult. This also includes nude or sexually suggestive or explicit photographic images of a child which are produced, possessed or distributed by any person."

⁷ The last survey response was received on April 30, 2019.

⁸ In person interviews were conducted during in Smithtown, NY and in Dallas, TX. In addition, GRACE conducted phone and video interviews. The same protocol was followed for each interview whereby witnesses agreed to the terms of communication with GRACE prior to beginning the interview, indicating an understanding of GRACE's interview protocol. Each witness was provided the opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy.

⁹ This name is a pseudonym.

¹⁰ Mr. Braaten told GRACE he served SGT in youth ministry for 15 years and resigned on September 1, 1996 before leaving for missions in Africa.

could be entered from the side parking lot of the church. Jane Doe also remembers playing inside Olivia Raye's home.¹¹ Jane Doe and Olivia Ray remained friends from kindergarten into first grade, as they were in the same class those years. Jane Doe stated that she went to Olivia's home during Kindergarten (1993) and first grade (1994) and would occasionally see each other in the summer. She also stated they sometimes got together even into the second grade, or at a birthday party.¹² Jane Doe said she "didn't go to [the Braaten's] house extremely often,"¹³ but when she was invited over, she would go.

Jane Doe stated from approximately 1993 to 1996 when she was ages 5 to 7, then Youth Pastor Braaten sexually abused her several times in the Braaten home in Smithtown. The sexual abuse she reported included Mr. Braaten initially grooming her by touching her with his hands on her stomach as she sat in his lap.¹⁴ Jane Doe also reported that Mr. Braaten took her into his bedroom and sexually abused her on several occasions.¹⁵ Jane Doe stated he also sexually assaulted her on one occasion in what she believed to be the Braaten's living quarters where they stayed at Camp Cherith in Corinth.¹⁶ During her reported sexual abuse at Camp Cherith, she also stated she saw Mr. Braaten laying on top of his daughter Olivia Raye "moving back and forth,"¹⁷ which Olivia Raye denies.¹⁸ Jane Doe stated she did not tell anyone what was happening at that time. She feared no one would believe her if she reported these matters due to his reputation in the community as SGT's former youth pastor and as a missionary.¹⁹

¹¹ In one of Jane Doe's earliest memories at Olivia Raye's home she explained, "[W]e sat on the floor playing in [Olivia's] living room's coffee table [sic]. The living room was to the right after entering her home. During our play, her father, Ron Braaten, came home and over to the coffee table. He seemed kind, smiling down at us but he did not ask my name, in fact he didn't even say hello. I was told this was Olivia's dad and I said, 'Hello.' The first thing he ever said to me was a question. 'How old are you?' I was confused since it seemed an odd way to say hi, but I answered. I told him 'five.' He smiled at me a bit longer before saying 'Perfect' and walking away. I didn't know why that felt so odd, but it did. I thought maybe he was just happy that [Olivia] had a friend close to her age, even though she was still four at the time. It was only as I reached adulthood that I realized what it meant to be 'perfect' for him."

¹² GRACE received some photographs from Olivia Raye and Jane Doe together at a birthday party, presumably at the Braaten home. In addition, GRACE received a photograph of their kindergarten class from the 1993-1994 school year in which both Jane Doe and Olivia Raye were identified in the photograph.

¹³ Jane Doe's mother is unsure of the number of times Jane Doe was at the Braaten home, but estimates it was around 10 or less. Jane Doe cannot be sure of the exact number of times she was at the Braaten home, but estimates it was approximately around 10 or 15 times.

¹⁴ Jane Doe explained, "It started slow at first. He would rub my stomach over my clothes while we sat and talked. It started to feel weird when he began to lift my shirt and slowly rub my stomach more, but now on my bare skin. I didn't know why this felt wrong though. As far as I knew, this wasn't really a private area of my body, and he was a good man, a pastor. If anything was wrong, I knew it must be something wrong with me. Soon enough his hand slid under the elastic of my underpants and we continued to talk as he continued to softly rub my stomach area and moved his hands lower and lower. I slowly went quiet and still and started to get dizzy and very confused. His hands did not yet touch any of my specific private areas, but instead all around them, stopping right before it hit any area I was sure was wrong. So I thought nothing was really wrong and it would be bad to tell him to stop or to push him away. But I wanted it to stop. That was when I began to realize something was very wrong with me. All I knew was he was good... I felt wrong... so I must be doing something wrong, even though I sat motionless staring out the backdoor the whole time."

¹⁵ For privacy, all of the details of the reported sexual abuse are not included here. However, the sexual acts as reported are criminal in nature and include touching on top of and underneath clothing. The reported sexual acts include several specific instances of penile and oral penetration of a child.

¹⁶ Camp Cherith changed its name in 2009 to Camp Cedarbrook in the Adirondacks. See <https://www.campcedarbrook.org/about-cca/our-history/>. GRACE interviewed the former camp director and Jane Doe's camp counselor and neither one had any knowledge of Jane Doe's reported abuse at the time she attended camp.

¹⁷ Jane Doe explained, "They were on the bed. Ron was on top of [Olivia] moving back and forth over her. He still had a shirt on but I am not sure if anything more. I tried not to look at him at all because I was terrified."

¹⁸ Olivia Raye told GRACE, "That's just not true. I don't know why she would say that. My dad has never hurt me." She also said, "I don't ever remember my dad being in that position on top of me or being in that kind of close proximity to me in that manner, shape, or form. So, there was no way to even misinterpret something like that. There's nothing to misinterpret. We were never alone in that room. The downstairs room with the double bed, that was never our room. It doesn't line up."

¹⁹ Jane Doe explained, "I still knew no one would believe me once I said who it was, so that was still kept secret for years-with the friends that knew small details, and even my therapist and Pastor [Fran]. I just knew no one would believe me and if I ever were to let it slip who it was, I would be hated by everyone I loved I would ruin their trust in God and the church, and just ruin everything for so many people. More devastatingly, I 'knew' God would hate me for speaking... because it was almost as if I felt I was keeping *His* secret as well and protecting *His* reputation. This was on of *His* people that *He* chose, and I still had that deep feeling that God was *not* on my side with any of this and did not want me speaking against this man."

As a result of these events, Jane Doe, now age 30, reported suffering a number of psychological and physical effects during and since her childhood including but not limited to fear, anxiety, severe depression,²⁰ flashbacks, insomnia, suicidal thoughts, loss of appetite, some instances of enuresis,²¹ and chronic stomach and jaw pain due to Mr. Braaten's reported sexual abuse.

Ron Braaten's Response to Jane Doe's Allegations

Mr. Braaten described his success as a youth pastor for 15 years and his fruitful mission work in Africa and Belize for over 20 years. When asked about Jane Doe's report, Mr. Braaten adamantly denied having committed any form of sexual misconduct against Jane Doe or against any other person at any time.²² He also denied having any sexual contact with any person apart from his wife.²³

When GRACE spoke with Mr. Braaten, he initially stated he did not know Jane Doe and had never met her.²⁴ He also explained, "It's not true. I have never done anything to that young lady. Period. How she put my name in it I have no idea. Why, I have no idea. But how do you defend yourself over something so detailed." Mr. Braaten agreed that Jane Doe accurately described the overall layout of their home including the bedroom placement. When Mr. Braaten was asked about Jane Doe's report at Camp Cherith, he likewise denied committing any form of sexual misconduct. However, Mr. Braaten acknowledged²⁵ he and his family were still in the United States in the summer of 1996, before leaving for Africa in September 1996.²⁶ When asked about the description of the location at Camp Cherith where Jane Doe stated the abuse had occurred, he acknowledged Jane Doe had described "The Bird House"²⁷ which Camp Cherith used as staff housing.²⁸ Mr. Braaten also could think of no reason for Jane Doe or anyone to make a false allegation against him.

²⁰ Jane Doe described "the constant intrusive thoughts, nightmares and wanting to die.... [I] was still extremely depressed and would spend days in bed and not eat for days and and throw up all the time anytime I tried to eat or do anything. I figured it was stress but nobody knew what was happening."

²¹ Jane Doe reported some instances of urinary incontinence in the third grade due to these events.

²² Mr. Braaten stated to GRACE, "But to me, I'm so bewildered that it would come this way. I have no clue. I've never, ever been compromised in my character, in my integrity, in my care for people. I've never done anything. To me, I have no idea why this person is so adamant that I was the one that assaulted her in such a way. I don't know what else I can say, except that there's no way that I had done anything. I have never had that temptation, a sexual fantasy about being with a five-year-old, or a whatever. This is so absurd I have to talk about this, it makes me nauseous to think about that. It's not something I've ever engaged in, or ever in any way entertained in my mind. That's just not who I am. I'm a man of God and integrity. I've served honorably in every place I've been. This has really caught me off guard. It's been a very difficult 10 months to deal with this accusation."

²³ Mr. Braaten told GRACE, "I have never touched a girl, a female, whatever age, in a sexual way to my gratification, ever. Period. What that means, I don't know how else to describe that. I've never been unfaithful to my wife, period. There's never been a teenager - and I've worked with lots of beautiful teenage girls all my youth ministry days, I have never compromised anything with them in my life. Period. Or any children, there's been no one. Because the Lord gives me wisdom and strength, and I've done everything honorably before the Lord. I have no guilt before God about how I conduct myself with people. So this accusation is so ridiculous, because there's no truth whatsoever. In my mind. In hers there is, but there's a problem somewhere. There's a problem somewhere." He also stated, "Verbally, mentally, emotionally or sexually, I've never caused anyone pain willfully because I've done any of those things. I haven't physically beat anybody up. I haven't emotionally scarred anybody. I haven't verbally hurt anybody, or sexually exploited anybody. That's it. I've stayed clean before God in my conscience that this is something that is not true regarding me."

²⁴ GRACE obtained a Facebook message exchange between Mr. Braaten and Jane Doe from 2010. Upon showing the exchange to Mr. Braaten, he explained that he must communicated with her, but did not remember her and does not know her, and that he responds to people on Facebook "because it's usually people from the youth group kids."

²⁵ Mr. Braaten told GRACE, "I left in '96. 'Cuz [Olivia Raye] was like seven when we went to Africa." Mr. Braaten also explained, "We left [for Africa] in September of '96, I think it was."

²⁶ In addition, camp staff records from 1996 indicate that Mr. Braaten's wife and Jane Doe's mother were both on staff at Camp Cherith in the summer of 1996. Mr. Braaten was not listed as "camp staff" in the 1996 records, however Mr. Braaten stated that he drove campers back and forth from Smithtown to camp during the summer.

²⁷ Jane Doe's camp counselor recalled Mr. Braaten and stated they would have stayed in either "The Bird House" or a trailer when they were at Camp Cherith during the years she was there (1995-2001). The Camp Director also stated that "every once in a while staff members who were in need of temporary housing have lived in 'The Bird House' for short periods of time" though she did not recall whether the Braatens did, and no camp records exist regarding their housing at Camp Cherith. In addition, both camp employees recalled Mr. Braaten being present typically for work weeks in the spring or fall, although they noted that he could have come up for a visit during the summertime to see his family.

²⁸ When asked about the location which Jane Doe described (which Mr. Braaten had previously identified as "the Bird House,") and whether he had stayed in it, he stated, "I may have stayed with my wife, if I'd driven the kids up or something for the night. That's possible. Again, 25 years ago to remember all the details of my life, it's impossible. But it wasn't a regular place I'd stay." Mr. Braaten also told

Jane Doe's Disclosures to her therapist, her local pastor, friends, her family, and SGT

Jane Doe first disclosed the reported abuse to a friend who was not from New York in the fall of 2007.²⁹ She did not disclose Mr. Braaten's name at that time. In addition, she began to see a therapist beginning in 2009, and over time, disclosed the reported abuse in therapy sessions.³⁰ Jane Doe also began counseling with Pastor Fran,³¹ her home church pastor. During this time, she slowly described how she had been sexually abused, but because of her fear that her pastor would feel differently about her if she knew the identity of her reported abuser, she did not reveal his name.³² Eventually, in April 2016, Jane Doe first disclosed Ron Braaten's name to a close friend³³ and then approximately five months later, she disclosed Mr. Braaten's name to Pastor Fran.

In October 2016, Jane Doe finally disclosed these incidents, including Mr. Braaten's identity to one of her sisters. With the help of her sister and Pastor Fran,³⁴ Jane Doe then made the decision to tell her family about these events at a family meeting on December 26, 2017. Upon learning of these events, they were shocked and devastated. They began to provide support to Jane Doe in a number of ways, including reporting these matters to the relevant police jurisdictions. In spring of 2018, Jane Doe met with the Suffolk County police and the Saratoga County police to provide sworn statements regarding these events. However, the police could not move forward with an investigation because the statute of limitations had expired. Additionally, Jane Doe provided a 10 page written statement to SGT's Senior Pastor and Elders providing significant details regarding her account of Mr. Braaten's abuse she reported experiencing as a young child.

Other Witness Testimony Pertaining to Jane Doe's Allegations of Sexual Abuse

GRACE interviewed a number of individuals regarding Jane Doe's reported sexual abuse, including members of Jane Doe's family, Pastor Fran, two therapists,³⁵ two friends in whom Jane Doe confided,³⁶ along with Mr.

GRACE that he did not regularly stay at Camp Cherith during the summertime and that usually he and his wife stayed in a trailer on the property only during work weeks in the spring or fall when campers were not present.

²⁹ The friend told GRACE that when Jane Doe disclosed these events to her in the fall of 2007, Jane Doe's "eyes [were] down and just tears streaming out." She explained that she was trying to talk to Jane Doe about her life and "what had happened" and, "I just remember [Jane Doe] had never told a soul because she never felt safe and that anyone would believe her because of who the person was, and the kind of, seemingly, spiritual person who does missions and adopts children, I guess." She stated that Jane Doe did not reveal his name but only that the person had been a youth pastor at a different church from the church she attended. The witness further explained, after having known Jane Doe for over 12 years, that Jane Doe has never been a person who desires "attention" or "drama" and that she does not believe Jane Doe would ever make up anything to hurt anyone.

³⁰ Jane Doe reported that when she first started seeing her therapist she told her, "Very little. Not anything near the full story. Probably 1% of it. I told her it was a friend's dad, but I don't think I went into many details. There was this overwhelming guilt that I am a horrible person if I say something because everybody loves him and he is a good person. Because I am so connected with my [relatives] going to that church and me going to that school there are a million mutual friends, I will so often see comments about him like, 'You are the closest thing to Jesus I have ever seen.' At that point, I thought I would never say who it was."

³¹ This name is a pseudonym.

³² Jane Doe stated, "As I went through counseling for years I still did not tell the therapist it was a pastor or even the full story. Even with Pastor [Fran] involved it took about 10 years before I even disclosed to her that it was a youth pastor. I felt it made me worse of a person that I would talk so badly about one of God's people and I believed everyone would hate me."

³³ Jane Doe's friend told GRACE about Jane Doe's difficulty of revealing Ron Braaten's name. She explained, "So, I know that [Jane Doe] struggled a lot, because he was so well respected in the community. He was such a good person. And I know it was a struggle for [Jane Doe] to actually say something against him, bring these allegations because of, you know. He was so well loved in the community...."

³⁴ Pastor Fran said, "it was difficult, but it was needed, and I've seen a big change in [Jane Doe] since then. And now that it was out, and she could talk to her family, and get their support, and they were very supportive. That was a real step forward for her."

³⁵ Jane Doe regularly sees a counselor and a psychotherapist who prescribes medication for her treatment. Her psychotherapist has worked with Jane Doe on a weekly basis since May 2010 (apart from one period of time in which she did not pursue counseling for about 6 to 12 months). Her counselor and psychotherapist have worked together to treat Jane Doe for the diagnoses of Complex PTSD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder with panic attacks, and Major Depressive Disorder. Her psychotherapist stated that Jane Doe has suffered extensively with symptoms such as flashbacks, disassociation, insomnia, depression, fear, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts as a result of her reported abuse.

³⁶ As one of Jane Doe's friends explained, "This has had a huge impact on [Jane Doe]. I know that she has struggled so much with anxiety, and depression, just because it is hard for her.... It messes with your self-esteem, it messes with- just your every day. And I know it's a struggle for her every day, with her anxiety, even her relationships with people. Because this is not something that- This impacts her life so much as far as how you feel every day. And just having the flashbacks, I know that's a huge thing for her, is having the flashbacks of

Braaten's family members, including his wife³⁷ and Olivia Raye,³⁸ Camp Cherith personnel,³⁹ and other individuals who have lived and/or worked with Mr. Braaten in New York and in Belize. Mr. Braaten's family members denied that he has ever engaged in any sexual misconduct. Most interviewees reported having no indications or concerns that Mr. Braaten had engaged in any sexual misconduct.

*Witness Testimony Pertaining to Other Allegations of Sexual Misconduct Against Ron Braaten*⁴⁰

GRACE received a few reports related to additional concerns of alleged sexual misconduct committed by Mr. Braaten. First, SGT's Senior Pastor reported to GRACE that in the mid to late 1990's, a female missionary⁴¹ alleged that Mr. Braaten "looked at her lustfully" while in Belize.⁴² When SGT learned of this, the former Senior Pastor, SGT's Missions Pastor,⁴³ and the Chairman of the Missions Board asked Mr. Braaten and the woman to meet all together with her local pastor to discuss this matter. During this meeting, Mr. Braaten denied this event, but the woman insisted it had indeed occurred.⁴⁴

In addition, a woman who was formerly in Mr. Braaten's youth group reported that in approximately 1992, when she was about 16 years old, Mr. Braaten held her hand on a bus coming home from a youth trip.⁴⁵ Additionally, a survey respondent stated that at the age of 13, "Pastor Ron touched me inappropriately by grabbing my butt. He

everything. She can be having a wonderful day, and then all of a sudden, she'll remember- Something will trigger her, and it will just put her in this place of just panic, and fear. So- It is pretty difficult as someone who's lived through it, to live through that every day."

³⁷ Mr. Braaten's wife told GRACE she "totally believe[s] in [her] husband's innocence." She also stated she does not specifically remember Jane Doe or her mother. She further stated that apart from a birthday party in their home which Olivia recalls Jane Doe attended, her daughter did not have friends over. When asked if Mr. Braaten had ever been accused of sexual misconduct in the past, she stated, "No. I can't remember ever anyone ever saying anything."

³⁸ Olivia denied that Mr. Braaten had sexually abused her (see footnote 18). She also stated that she remembered Jane Doe but was not close friends with her. She recalled that she had some interaction with Jane Doe in their home in Smithtown, for example, for her birthday party.

³⁹ Jane Doe's camp counselor told GRACE she was Jane Doe's camp counselor in the summer of 1996 at Camp Cherith, however she only remembered Jane Doe vaguely by her name and her picture. The camp counselor told GRACE she remembered Mr. Braaten and "knew him well around camp because he did a lot of the building work there, and he built a lot of the cabins." She explained that typically Mr. Braaten "tended to be there more, I think, sort of pre-camp times to do sort of maintenance work. But that's not to say he didn't come during camp weeks as well. It's a long time ago." The camp counselor worked at Camp Cherith for six years and stated that the Braatens would have stayed in either "The Bird House" or a trailer when they were at Camp Cherith during the years she was there.

⁴⁰ In the analysis section that follows, we provide no discussion of the additional alleged sexual misconduct reports from this section of the report because some of the information could not be verified due to the inability to contact and locate several relevant witnesses. However, this information is included in the report for two reasons. First, the information provided falls squarely within the scope of the Engagement Agreement (i.e., "GRACE shall investigate any and all allegations of sexual misconduct by Ron Braaten..."). Second, when GRACE specifically asked Mr. Braaten if he had ever been accused of sexual misconduct at any time in the past, he stated that he had not ever been accused of sexual misconduct before. Some of the information provided to GRACE noted in this section indicates otherwise. This is relevant to Mr. Braaten's credibility as a witness.

⁴¹ SGT was unaware of where she is now. GRACE also attempted, without success, to locate her for an interview.

⁴² The Senior Pastor told GRACE that, per his recollection, this occurred in Belize "when they would get together for dinner as a couple, or if they were on the church grounds, or on the ministry, mission grounds. You know, where they were working with the children. That if she walked by or whatever, she felt that Ron was looking at her lustfully. That's basically how she described it." He also recalled her indicating that Mr. Braaten did not "do anything" to her but explained that "[Mr. Braaten] looks like he's checking me out in a lustful way."

⁴³ The former Missions Pastor is now SGT's Senior pastor.

⁴⁴ The current Senior Pastor recalled the meeting and noted, "[The missionary woman] got pretty strong in that meeting, as I recall now. I remember she got up and she said [to Mr. Braaten], 'You know. You know how you been looking at me.' And he was just a little too- I wanted him to get a little bit more feisty, but he didn't. He just remained quiet, non-combative. But he definitely denied it all. There's no question, he denied it." When asked about this incident during his interview with GRACE, Mr. Braaten said he did not recall this complaint or the meeting thereafter with the woman and the pastors.

⁴⁵ This witness stated after an emotionally taxing event during the trip, "But we were driving home and he was driving. It was like a bus van kind of thing. And there was like a big open space behind him. I don't know if I was looking to comfort him or I was looking to get comfort or what. I will say that I sort of initiated. I started to kind of rub his shoulders. I stood behind him and was like rubbing his shoulders, just trying to talk to him, get something about some sort of comfort or answers or what happened here or something. And then he did reach his hand up and held my hand, and kind of stroked it a little bit. It felt awkward. It started to feel like it was crossing a line. I think I was 16, I don't know, I didn't have any- I never had a boyfriend, nothing like that. I just felt like it was uncomfortable, but also I felt like I had started it, so I didn't move or leave or anything. I don't know. It felt like it was a moment, I guess. It didn't feel appropriate. It didn't go further than that."

did it twice within the same moment but lightened it by joking with me.”⁴⁶ Also, an interviewee reported that Mr. Braaten touched a teenage girl “on the butt,”⁴⁷ in Belize in “an inappropriate way.”⁴⁸ Some interviewees described seeing a teenage Belizean girl riding on Mr. Braaten’s lap on a bus in Belize, as well as seeing him take young girls alone on motorcycle rides.⁴⁹

Finally, an interviewee living in Belize told GRACE about making an anonymous report to Belizean police approximately two years ago because local Belizeans repeatedly expressed concern that Mr. Braaten had potentially impregnated one of the girls (then a teenager) living in their home.⁵⁰ The witness who made the report to the Belizean police told GRACE that to her knowledge, the police never followed up on her report.⁵¹ Another Belizean who had lived in the Braaten home in Belize likewise told GRACE that a group of local Belizean pastors asked him about their concern about Mr. Braaten’s time spent with this teenager living in his home, and the pastors specifically inquired if the Belizean knew whether Mr. Braaten was the father of her child. The Belizean told the pastors that he did not know, but told GRACE that he felt Mr. Braaten’s behavior with the girl was “very inappropriate.”⁵² Another Belizean witness told GRACE that approximately three years ago, Mr. Braaten confided that he had been confronted by some Belizeans about this allegation, and he was very angry about the

⁴⁶ This survey taker did not provide a name or contact information and GRACE was therefore unable to investigate or verify this report. However, this person reported in the survey, “When I was 13, Pastor Ron touched me inappropriately by grabbing my butt. He did it twice within the same moment but lightened it by joking with me. Nothing happened after that and nothing was said. I felt that it was not a normal action but never said anything due to it not getting out of hand after that. I always held him in high regard and didn’t want to make a big deal of the act because it seemed in jest. After hearing the news through the public announcement (from a friend who still attends there), I felt it was my duty to say something regardless of how minor it may have seemed at the time. Now that I am an adult, I think it was highly inappropriate, especially if this action would have been done against my kids or anyone else’s kids.”

⁴⁷ An interviewee from Belize told GRACE that a boy from the youth group saw Mr. Braaten “smacking a girl’s butt.” The interviewee explained, “the guy was in the very back of the bus. And Pastor Ron thought that it was empty. And no one was there. And so, he said he waited until they had left to get out, because he was scared that Pastor Ron saw him.” Another interviewee told GRACE she has seen Mr. Braaten patting teenage girls on the buttocks telling them to “hurry” across the street.

⁴⁸ The GRACE investigator clarified if this was done as a form of discipline and the witness said it was not and that it was an act committed in “an inappropriate way.”

⁴⁹ A witness told GRACE, “Once I saw driving back from the airport with the bus, [a girl] sit on [Mr. Braaten’s] lap, driving the bus, going down the highway. Whether that, to me, it just put- bad idea. Number one, it’s dangerous for a child to be driving the bus on the highway, number two, having a pre-teen, young teen girl, sitting on your lap is inappropriate, to me. So, anyway, that judgment was something that I questioned as being a good consideration.” Another witness reported to GRACE, “she would even sit on his lap. They were always going together on the motorcycle, like Pastor Ron, and he would put [the girl] on the back.” A third witness told GRACE, “[O]ne of the young ladies, and she was about I guess 12, 13, had to go somewhere I guess. So, there was a motorcycle, so instead of taking the van, [Mr. Braaten] took the motorcycle and the girl hops on the motorcycle and just the way she was sitting and stuff, I’m like, ‘This is so inappropriate. So inappropriate.’”

⁵⁰ GRACE received a few reports of concern that Mr. Braaten is possibly the father of the child of one of the teenage girls who had lived in his home in Belize. One witness told GRACE that the children who lived in the Braaten home in Belize indicated that Mr. Braaten’s wife was angry with Mr. Braaten due to the fact that he was “spending too much time with [this young girl].” Mr. Braaten’s wife denied to GRACE that she had been angry with him regarding this issue and explained, “I don’t always agree with his compassion, but his compassion is usually in helping people with money, with things like that. And I do not always agree with how much he gives. I believe this ... There’s a line where you need to stop, because you’re enabling. And sometimes him and I don’t agree on that line. But we don’t ... it’s, there’s ... Oh, gosh. No, it’s not true. It’s not true.” She went on to explain, “I have never complained about his spending time with her, because he doesn’t. He doesn’t spent [crosstalk] time with her. But I have, I have talked to him about ... I don’t know where people think we’re fighting. But I have talked to him about how much he enables her by ... But [girl] is like a daughter to us. And we both feel the same way about that. But Ron is an indulgent ... well, I don’t know if I would say ... when he sees a need, he likes to fill the need. And so, but it’s always money, putting a bathroom in the house where she’s living, those kinds of things. But he does the same thing for our daughters in the States. He goes up there, he builds something for them, takes care of them. That’s his way of showing his love, is care. But, no, I have never fought with him.”

⁵¹ GRACE requested information from the Belizean authorities regarding any reports of child abuse about Mr. Braaten and no response was ever provided. Some Belizean witnesses told GRACE that because Mr. Braaten builds homes for Belizeans in an impoverished community, the Belizeans are unlikely to speak to GRACE, to report misconduct concerns about Mr. Braaten, and the police are unlikely to investigate it.

⁵² The Belizean witness provided some examples of this behavior and explained, “[s]ome of the things that I have seen, there have been numerous times that I have seen only him and her together. There were times when she needed certain things, and he would drop everything to really go and come to her rescue, and those are things that I have seen very personally, with my own eyes. And those were things that I was pretty much very uneasy about.”

accusation.⁵³ GRACE specifically asked Pastor Braaten if he had ever been accused of sexual misconduct at any time in the past, and he stated that he had not. Mr. Braaten explained,

Like I said, my wife, I'm always with my wife. I am never in a position that I would- the Scripture is talking about, don't even let me name them. Don't even put yourself in a place where someone could accuse you. Even up to this day, believe me, I would never go into a woman's house alone. If I'm gonna talk to her about her family or helping her, let's come outside where everybody can see where I am. For all my life, that's who I've been. I've been very careful to safeguard and protect myself from accusers. How this happened, I have no clue. And why, I have no clue. All I know is, I know what I do with my life. I know I've never, ever done anything to any person, any age.⁵⁴

SGT's Knowledge and Response to Jane Doe's Allegations Against Ron Braaten

GRACE did not find evidence that SGT representatives knew about Jane Doe's alleged abuse or any other allegations of sexual misconduct against Mr. Braaten during the time he was SGT's youth pastor.⁵⁵

After many years of counseling with Pastor Fran, Jane Doe eventually disclosed Mr. Braaten's name to Pastor Fran. Pastor Fran believed it was important to notify SGT about Mr. Braaten since he has a "children's ministry in Belize."⁵⁶ Sometime in spring of 2017, Pastor Fran said she spoke with SGT's Senior Pastor about Jane Doe's report of abuse. Pastor Fran told GRACE that when informing the Senior Pastor and a few other SGT leaders of this matter in a conference call, she provided Jane Doe's name, however she told the Senior Pastor that Jane Doe's name could not be disclosed to Mr. Braaten.⁵⁷ Pastor Fran stated that SGT's Senior Pastor called and confronted Mr. Braaten about the allegations a few days later. After the Senior Pastor confronted Mr. Braaten about this matter, Pastor Fran recalls the Senior Pastor leaving her a message informing her via voicemail that Mr. Braaten had denied the allegation.⁵⁸

⁵³ The witness told GRACE, "[Mr. Braaten] arrived at the church when [we] were working on the bathroom, fixing up the bathroom, and [Mr. Braaten] said that he had just come from talking with the pastor in Belmopan about- there is a coalition of churches that at one time the church when he was a pastor was still kind of going to monthly worship meetings and things like that. There's different pastors that work together. They're closer in this city of Belmopan. He said that one of them spoke with him saying that these allegations were going around that he had an inappropriate relationship with a young lady from a village between Belmopan and Unitedville, that had occasionally worked at Oasis and also had been a part of the church at one point, kind of back and forth a part of the church, I guess I would say. Wasn't always committed. I could not remember specific words, but [Mr. Braaten] was clearly upset when he arrived and seemed to be in shock that someone had said that to him.... I know that there were allegations that he had had an inappropriate with a Belizean young lady and that even he was the father of one of her children... One of the pastors brought it to [Mr. Braaten's] attention saying, 'This is what's being said, is this true?' [Mr. Braaten] told us that it was not true and he was very upset that someone had said that about him."

⁵⁴ Mr. Braaten also stated, "I've never done anything in a sexual way to any person any age. Like I said, I was a virgin 'til I got married, on our wedding night, and for 45 years I've been faithful to my wedding vow. And there's never been any person, any age, that I have had a sexual encounter with. Period."

⁵⁵ GRACE interviewed SGT's former Senior Pastor from the time Mr. Braaten was SGT's youth pastor. The former Senior Pastor told GRACE he had hired Mr. Braaten and believed him to be a "person of great integrity." In addition, the former Senior Pastor said he had "not heard anything but good about him" and did not know of any sexual misconduct committed by Mr. Braaten. He explained, "[Mr. Braaten] had visions, a lot of visions for youth ministry and for missions and all that type of thing, and he was always very, very active in that area, and very, very successful in that area. And so, when he went to Belize, we kind of ... I was down there. I saw the work he had done building a church and everything else. I've never, ever questioned his integrity."

⁵⁶ Pastor Fran said, "And now I felt like, 'Okay, now I've got to do something, because this man has the children's ministry in Belize.'" Jane Doe stated, "I talked to Pastor [Fran] and she kept it confidential, but at some point (not sure when) she started feeling like she needed to say something to the [Senior Pastor and his wife] to warn them. He would come back and they would have him as a guest youth speaker. When he came down, it was this whole thing for me. I would stay inside for a while. She asked me how I felt about that if she could speak with them and not say who I was but that she would tell them the whole story but leave my name out of it to let them know."

⁵⁷ Jane Doe stated that on, "June 26, 2017, Pastor [Fran] informed me she spoke with SGT group of Pastors and told them what happened, but kept my name anonymous. August 2017, I was told [the Senior Pastor] called him and asked if he did it, he said no, so [the Senior Pastor] left a voicemail on my pastor's phone saying they asked him, he said no, so the matter was over."

⁵⁸ Pastor Fran told GRACE, "Yep, a couple of weeks after that, [the Senior Pastor] left the message and said, 'I spoke to [Mr. Braaten], he denies it, and we're going to certainly keep our eyes out, and it's just that without her being willing to stand up and say something, our hands are pretty tied.'" She also stated, "[A]ll I can tell you is the sense that I got was that it really was not taken very seriously, the first phone call I made, at all."

The Senior Pastor told GRACE that he called Mr. Braaten in Belize to confront him about this matter. He stated, “[The allegations] were pretty graphic and ugly and it was disturbing. So, I put Ron’s feet to the fire with that. I didn’t hold back, but he just adamantly denied it and was offended and appalled, disturbed by it.” The Senior Pastor explained that he asked Pastor Fran again for permission to provide Jane Doe’s name so that he could press Mr. Braaten more since it was “she said/Ron said,” but that Pastor Fran told him Jane Doe was “very fragile” and they preferred not bringing Jane Doe’s or Pastor Fran’s names into the matter. The Senior Pastor explained, “It just kind of died at that moment. I didn’t know if I should’ve taken more action on that.” When Jane Doe learned that no additional action was taken regarding her disclosures, she stated it impacted her negatively.⁵⁹

Mr. Braaten returned to Smithtown for SGT’s annual missions conference in May 2018. On the Sunday evening of the mission’s conference, law enforcement confronted Mr. Braaten outside SGT’s church building and asked him to come to the police station.⁶⁰ Mr. Braaten denied the allegations and, at the time, agreed to go speak to the police after the service ended.⁶¹ Pastor Braaten went inside and spoke with some SGT members about what had just occurred outside with the police. After the mission’s conference, some SGT members including the Senior Pastor attempted to assist Mr. Braaten with what to do next, including contacting legal counsel.⁶² Mr. Braaten told the Senior Pastor that law enforcement wanted him to take a polygraph. The Senior Pastor said he advised Mr. Braaten, “Maybe hold steady on that, Ron. I don’t know what to advise you to do. I can’t tell you not to do something, but maybe just hold and get some legal advice.” Mr. Braaten considered whether he should obtain counsel and did not go to the police station.⁶³

A few days later, Jack and Diane Smith,⁶⁴ longtime SGT members, met with the Senior Pastor and told him that the person who reported Mr. Braaten for sexual abuse was his relative.⁶⁵ Soon thereafter, the Elder Board met and

⁵⁹ Jane Doe told GRACE, “They called Ron and asked if he did this and he said no. The [Senior Pastor] then left a voicemail with Pastor [Fran] and told her that there was nothing they could do. I understand if there is not a name to go along with it that poses a problem, but for me that was a very re-traumatizing thing for me. First of all, all the belief all the years that no one was going to believe me and now they don’t. There was a total distrust of male authorities, especially pastors. A woman pastor met with them and all these men pastors say it is okay and it doesn’t matter. It felt like it was that he holds the power and if he says so his word is much stronger than mine.” Jane Doe’s counselor likewise explained, “Most of the people [from SGT] that [Jane Doe] spoke to did not believe what she said and basically said that she was making it up, that it wasn’t true. Because of that, she then shut down and didn’t want to continue to tell her story. I think a lot of it is that they didn’t believe her, and the things they said about her, so that was re-traumatizing for her, and I don’t know that she’ll ever really get over that because she knows really, truly how they initially responded to her, and she doesn’t believe that that changes. I think the fact that they minimized that it happened, said that she made it up, and then didn’t think that she was telling the truth, which is the reason why she never told to begin with. She didn’t think anybody would believe her, she didn’t think that these kinds of things, anybody would ever do anything about it.”

⁶⁰ Mr. Braaten stated, “That night I’m going to the last service of the convention, I hear my name call[ed] from behind me from a man. So many people know me, that I don’t know who they are. I’m thinking, hey, I move and shake his hand. We’re detectives from the Suffolk County Police Department. We have to talk to you about an allegation, blah-blah-blah. What? They’re grilling me in front of the church. I’m dying. I’m like, did they say, come to the 5th Precincts right now and take a lie detector test, if you pass it we’ll let you go? Am I arrested? Talk about devastating. I was ready to die. I was ready to die. How could this possibly come down this way? This is wrong.”

⁶¹ The Suffolk County Police Department police report states that Mr. Braaten arrived at SGT around 6pm on May 20, 2018 for the conference and was interviewed in the SGT parking lot by police. The report noted that Mr. Braaten advised the police he “had a vague memory of [Jane Doe] and denied all allegations.” The report indicates that Mr. Braaten agreed to go to the police station, but prior to arriving, “evoked his right to counsel via telephone.”

⁶² The attorney told GRACE that he received a voicemail on his home number on the evening of May 20, 2018 from the Senior Pastor requesting legal assistance for Mr. Braaten. The attorney indicated that the Senior Pastor’s voicemail stated, “Poor Ron, some unstable girl is accusing him of abusing her 20 years ago. It’s crazy. Ron would never do such a thing. All he does is care about kids.” The attorney did not follow-up with Mr. Braaten because he had already been contacted by Jane Doe and her family regarding this same matter. The attorney also told GRACE, “And of course what the leadership of Smithtown Tabernacle didn’t know at the time was that girl was [Jack and Diane’s relative]. And so it was right after that, within a day or two, I spoke to [Jack and Diane Smith], I said, ‘You better go see the pastor.’ Then of course when they heard it was [Jack and Diane Smith’s relative], then they were no longer dismissive of this being some unstable girl from 20 years ago.”

⁶³ Mr. Braaten told GRACE, “I called the detective and I said, ‘I don’t know what to do.’ Or I saw a detective. I said, ‘I don’t know if I should call a lawyer.’ [The detective said], ‘Oh, you said the word, I can’t talk to you anymore.’ [Mr. Braaten said], ‘What word?’ [The detective said], ‘You said, lawyer.’ [Mr. Braaten] said, ‘I didn’t get a lawyer. I’m asking, I don’t know what to do. Do I get a lawyer?’ [The detective said], ‘Oh, you said the word, I can’t talk to you anymore.’ He hung up. Okay. Now, what do I do? I didn’t know what to do. I haven’t faced with this kind of nut thing before. Now I’m worried, are they gonna block my passport? Am I gonna get arrested? I’m freaking out. I was like, God, help me. This has been horrendous. This is absolutely horrendous.”

⁶⁴ These names are pseudonyms.

in preparation for their meetings, Jane Doe drafted a letter for SGT leaders detailing her allegations, along with a letter from her therapist and Pastor Fran.⁶⁶ These letters were submitted to the Elder Board and SGT pastors.⁶⁷ Soon thereafter, SGT leadership decided to hire GRACE and paused Mr. Braaten's funding temporarily during the pendency of an investigation.⁶⁸

II. ANALYSIS OF INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS⁶⁹

A. Analysis of Findings Related to Jane Doe's Disclosures of Sexual Misconduct⁷⁰ by Ron Braaten

In order to evaluate sexual misconduct, the investigators evaluated all of the witness testimony obtained and considered the totality of the facts and circumstances involved, including the nature of the alleged conduct and the context in which it reportedly occurred. The following points of analysis relating to these disclosures are worthy of consideration.

Contextual Plausibility: Ron Braaten's Access to Jane Doe at Alleged Times and Locations

In evaluating whether abuse may have occurred as Jane Doe reported it, it is important to review the context of the reported events, including specific details such as locations and times to determine whether Mr. Braaten in fact had access to Jane Doe as she alleged.

First, we evaluated the issue of identity and whether Jane Doe and Mr. Braaten knew one another, since Mr. Braaten initially stated he did not know Jane Doe and had never met her before.⁷¹ We noted, however, that after GRACE showed Mr. Braaten a Facebook exchange he had with Jane Doe in 2010, he acknowledged, "Okay. I

⁶⁵ Jane Doe stated, "After I went to the police and lawyer, [my relative] and [Jack Smith] went to [the Senior] Pastor. [My relative] does the worship and they have high up positions in the church. When [Jack Smith] told [the Senior Pastor] that what Pastor [Fran] told them was from [my] family, they were more serious. It bugged me because I felt like my word was not enough. What if it was someone who didn't have a [Jack Smith]? He is a big strong man, who, whatever. As soon as he said it, it was like, okay. They didn't listen to Pastor [Fran]. I am grateful I do have a [Jack Smith] but what if it was a stranger off the street. That bothered me."

⁶⁶ Jane Doe stated, "I think I wrote the letter for the meeting to decide if they are going to hire GRACE. I felt like I had to prove to them that I was not crazy. They wanted a letter from my therapist saying I am not crazy and from Pastor [Fran]. [My therapist] was really upset with them. She said, 'How dare them. You are not the one on trial here. What is going on.' [sic] The psychiatrist who was doing the actual therapy gave them a short letter and we gave that over. It was annoying. Why were they asking me these things? My pastor was upset to have to write anything, but she did."

⁶⁷ Jane Doe told GRACE, "I felt upset with how it was initially handled and I didn't want to leave room for too many vague things. At that point if they are still going to say to my [relative], 'I don't know whose side to be on,' here is the whole story and if you want to not believe me, that is their deal."

⁶⁸ GRACE was informed that SGT is holding Mr. Braaten's funds in an account. At the conclusion of the investigation, SGT will evaluate and determine whether to send the suspended funds to Mr. Braaten. The Senior Pastor reported that SGT has sent Mr. Braaten and his ministry approximately \$500 a month for approximately 20 years. In addition, about ten years ago, approximately \$30,000 "went to this ministry with the kids in Belize." The Senior Pastor stated that Mr. Braaten was a supported missionary rather than a "sent" missionary. The Senior Pastor explained, "We have a conceptual distinction between those two, supported missionary, a sent missionary. So, he's a supported missionary. If he was a sent missionary, there would be a tremendous amount of accountability with his ministry and finances that would all have to be submitted to us as a church. But he didn't really want that, so we classified him as a supported missionary and he received about \$500 per month.... We suspended that though, since the investigation began." Mr. Braaten told GRACE he considers SGT to be his "sending church" as he is still a member there. Mr. Braaten explained, "I'm a member of Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle. Go to the record book, and you'll see. I'm still a member of Smithtown Tabernacle....so to me, they're my sending church." Mr. Braaten also said, "Well, when people ask me, 'Who's your sending church?' That's my home church, where I'm a member."

⁶⁹ GRACE is a third party non-profit that engages in independent investigations to assist faith communities with appropriate responses to abuse disclosures. Though GRACE employs investigators with prior law enforcement and legal experience, GRACE is not a law firm and does not provide findings related to "guilt" or "innocence" as would a court of law. GRACE therefore makes no findings related to guilt or innocence, as that is what juries and judges are permitted to do. We do however provide here a summary of the relevant data points along with a reasoned analysis so that the reader may be properly equipped with understanding the facts gathered from the perspective of experts who regularly work in the field of child sexual abuse, and particularly abuse disclosures that are alleged to have occurred within a faith community.

⁷⁰ See footnote 6 for definition of sexual misconduct.

⁷¹ Mr. Braaten said, "On my side, there's nothing to talk about, because I'm not in her story. So I don't know what else I can tell you. I have not, in any way, done what she said I did. I don't know why she would pick my name. So I don't know what the relationship is that she would even know who I am. It's 25 years ago. I don't know."

respond to people, because it's usually people from the youth group kids." He further stated, "Obviously, I did respond to her. But as far as knowing her personally as far as on a one on one contact? I don't think I know her. I don't know her."⁷² Jane Doe's mother, however, recalled picking Jane Doe up from the Braaten home on several occasions. In addition, though Olivia Raye stated she and Jane Doe were not close friends, she agreed Jane Doe had been in her home during the timeframe in question.⁷³

Second, we evaluated contextual information relating to the locations of the reported events. Jane Doe stated she recalled the abuse began during her kindergarten year when she visited the Braaten home. Mr. Braaten was not able to explain how Jane Doe accurately recalled, approximately 25 years later, the layout of their home, including the placement of particular bedrooms. Jane Doe also recalled that some of the abuse initially began when he put his hands on the front part of her body during an occasion in which she sat on Mr. Braaten's lap in a chair facing the back of their house. She stated she remembered looking at the back door, "looking at the side of the church that was my school." When asked if he could see the back of the church from that vantage point, Mr. Braaten said, "Yeah, the sunken living room. You can see the church, yeah. But I would never hide, doing, I never did that." Jane Doe also described the location of abuse that she reported had occurred at Camp Cherith.⁷⁴ Though Mr. Braaten denies staying overnight regularly during the summer, he and camp staff relayed that he could have come up for a visit to see his family since his wife was there in the summer of 1996. And when Mr. Braaten was asked about the particular location described by Jane Doe, he acknowledged that she described "The Bird House" which Camp Cherith used as staff housing.

Finally, we evaluated the dates provided by Jane Doe to determine contextual plausibility. Jane Doe stated that the sexual abuse occurred in the Braaten home between the ages of five and seven and at Camp Cherith in the summer of 1996. Mr. Braaten acknowledged that he was still in New York until they left for Africa in September of 1996, which was likewise corroborated by Camp Cherith staff records.

While it is always possible that witnesses can lie about specific events, lying about sexual abuse typically becomes more challenging when the allegations span periods of time and differing locations. In this situation, Jane Doe alleges that she was sexually abused during specific time periods and in particular places. After an independent review of the information received from multiple sources, including information corroborated by Mr. Braaten, the data provided indicates that Mr. Braaten in fact had access to Jane Doe during the time periods and places in which she reported the abuse had occurred.

Witness Account Dynamics

When evaluating witness accounts, investigators must consider a number of important dynamics, including the ability of a witness to provide detail regarding alleged events, the overall consistency of a witness account over time, and witness credibility (for example, bias, character for truthfulness, and motive). Investigators considered these dynamics and provide the following points of analysis.

⁷² The Facebook message, dated 10/28/2010 from Mr. Braaten to Jane Doe stated, "I remember you. Where are you living now? [Olivia Raye] is in Seattle on a cross country road trip. Thanks for you [sic] prayer for us." Jane Doe stated that she does not ever recall sending Mr. Braaten any messages and she does not have any messages in her message history indicating that she messaged him first. She stated that possibly, though she does not recall it, the context for this message from Mr. Braaten could have occurred if she had commented on a photo of Olivia Raye, or upon something on his or Olivia's Facebook page, because this message was around the same timeframe that she had been in communication with Olivia Raye on Facebook. She stated that did not reply to this message.

⁷³ Olivia Raye provided photographs of a birthday party showing Olivia Raye and Jane Doe together at the party.

⁷⁴ Jane Doe recalled, "We sat by a large window, what I think is something similar to a bay area window, but has an area you can sit right beside the window. [Olivia and I] sat across from each other and just played." The Investigator asked Mr. Braaten: "Okay. But as far as a house, when she's talking about a house with the bay area window." Mr. Braaten responded: "Well the Bird House, it's called the Bird House. That's a staff house at the time. But again, I have not been that kind of a man to do these things to this girl. I mean I just cannot believe what she's written here. It's beyond me."

In evaluating Jane Doe's account, we noted she provided significant detail relating to the events in question.⁷⁵ She described not only the times and locations of the reported events, but she also described the sexual acts with specific detail. In addition, she relayed Pastor Braaten's reported statements made to her during the course of these alleged events. Jane Doe also described with particularity how she internalized feelings of shame, blame, helplessness, and fear associated with the abuse she described.⁷⁶

In addition, it is helpful to evaluate the timing and consistency of Jane Doe's statements about these events over the passage of time. Jane Doe's earliest known statements about these events were made to a friend, to two therapists, to a pastor, and eventually to her family. In evaluating the totality of these statements, GRACE found no evidence that Jane Doe has spoken inconsistently about the timeframes, locations, and the nature of the abuse itself over time. In addition, we noted that Jane Doe's disclosure occurred slowly, over a period of 10 plus years. This dynamic of "delayed disclosure" is extremely common in abuse cases because disclosure is most often considered a process, rather than a single event.⁷⁷ Victims of abuse may attempt to test responses to determine whether revealing the abuse is safe; if so, victims will often disclose more information piece by piece over a period of time. Because victims typically know the alleged perpetrator more than 90% of the time,⁷⁸ many feel a sense of responsibility for the abuse itself because of the difficulty in externalizing abusive experiences.⁷⁹ When an alleged perpetrator has a visible and positive reputation in the community (e.g., religious figures like priests or pastors, a beloved coach, or a respected law enforcement officer), victims can feel less inclined to report abuse.⁸⁰ Notably in this case, Jane Doe disclosed the abuse over a lengthy period of time, but revealed very little about Mr. Braaten's identity apart from consistently, but gradually, revealing his status as a community religious figure held in high esteem.

Motive and bias are also important data points, which must be considered when evaluating witness accounts. In this case, Jane Doe had no preexisting relationship with Mr. Braaten. By Mr. Braaten's own recollection, they had no relationship of any consequence. GRACE noted that Jane Doe waited a significant period of time to disclose

⁷⁵ Notably, if Jane Doe were going to falsely accuse Mr. Braaten of sexual abuse, her account need not have included the reported abuse of Olivia. Given the totality of all of the information, Jane Doe's assertion, even though Olivia disputes it, tends to underscore Jane Doe's credibility, rather than undermine it.

⁷⁶ While Jane Doe waited on her mother to finish talking with Olivia's mother when her mother came to pick her up at Olivia's home, she recalled, "At times as I stood waiting for them to stop talking so I could just leave, I would feel heavy hands on my shoulders as he stood behind me, holding on. He didn't say anything but it was a clear reminder that he was right there. Sometimes I would still feel the heaviness of his hands on my shoulders even after I left, as if it never left and the reminder to stay quiet was always present." Jane Doe also stated, "I grew up with my parents always saying that God is your best friend and having a relationship with Him and not that he is a distant God but that He is everywhere. So, before any of that I could picture God always being with me and talking to Him. So, it was a confusing feeling where it felt like suddenly He is not there or if He is where is He? Whose side is He on...He is not stopping it. I know this person is a pastor so God is on his side. It was a very muddy confused thing. It didn't fit- God is always there so then what? It was that with a whole lot of guilt because it didn't feel like God's people. They don't do that so I made it happen or something. I don't know what, but I must have done something, I don't know." She also stated, "I don't remember any specific conversation not to say anything except for him saying, 'Shhhh.' That was later stuff when I was crying, but he might have said something. It was more weird. It almost didn't occur to say anything because it felt like my thing (my fault). I turned a good person bad and it felt just as much my secret as his. I don't know. It was more of the unspoken messages of him being there and his hand on my shoulder. Sometimes there would be the look in his eyes where he would have red sad eyes and I would feel so guilty, 'What am I doing,' as if I was someone making him do this. That it was my fault. I don't know. Not that he never said no to say anything but I don't remember a specific conversation."

⁷⁷ Sorensen T, Snow B., How Children Tell: The Process of Disclosure in Child Sexual Abuse. *Child Welfare*. 1991 Jan-Feb;70(1):3-15. University of Utah, Salt Lake City. See also Alaggia, R., Collin-Vézina, D., Lateef, R., Facilitators and Barriers to Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Disclosures: A Research Update (2000–2016) Volume: 20 issue: 2, page(s): 260-283. Article first published online: March 23, 2017; Issue published: April 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838017697312> ("Disclosure is now generally accepted as a complex and lifelong process, with current trends showing that CSA [child sexual abuse] disclosures are too often delayed until adulthood (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015; Easton, 2013; Hunter, 2011). Knowledge building about CSA [child sexual abuse] disclosure has moved in the direction of understanding this as an iterative and interactive process rather than a discrete, one-time event. Since the new millennium, disclosure is being viewed as a dynamic, rather than static, process and described 'not as a single event but rather a carefully measured process' (Alaggia, 2005, p. 455)").

⁷⁸ Finkelhor, D., Hamby, S., Ormrod, R., & Turner, H. (2005). The Victimization of Children and Youth: A Comprehensive, National Survey. *Child Maltreatment*, 10(1), 5–25.

⁷⁹ Hall, M., & Hall, J. (2011). The Long-Term Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Counseling Implications. Retrieved from http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas11/Article_19.pdf.

⁸⁰ Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018).

these matters. At the time of her disclosures, Mr. Braaten no longer attended SGT and did not live in the United States any longer. In addition, Pastor Fran, not Jane Doe, initiated the request to report these alleged criminal acts to SGT. In fact, these disclosures came after the expiration of statutes of limitations. GRACE found no evidence demonstrating any discernible bias or motive for Jane Doe to falsely accuse Mr. Braaten of sexual abuse. Jane Doe's stated reason for agreeing that these allegations would be revealed was so that others would know the truth and could possibly protect any other minors from having contact with him.

Psychological, Physical, and Spiritual Impact on Jane Doe

As documented by a number of studies, childhood sexual abuse has been "correlated with higher levels of depression, guilt, shame, self-blame, eating disorders, somatic concerns, anxiety, dissociative patterns, repression, denial, sexual problems, and relationship problems. Depression has been found to be the most common long-term symptom among survivors."⁸¹ Jane Doe has exhibited a number of behaviors observed by her family and treated by two therapists over a period of ten years which have included a range of negative psychological and physical effects including but not limited to depression, eating abnormalities, sleeplessness, fear, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and chronic stomach and jaw pain. These behaviors can be consistent with sexual abuse.⁸² In addition, Jane Doe expressed how these reported events impacted her emotionally and spiritually at that time.⁸³

After a review of the evidence, including the nature of the allegations and the context in which it reportedly occurred, the totality of the information points to a significant degree of credibility relative to Jane Doe's disclosures as well as underscores the weaknesses in Mr. Braaten's denials. Jane Doe's account has been detailed and consistent over a significant period of time, and critical data points relating to time and location corroborate her account. In addition, a number of witnesses provided credible information relating to the impact of these events on Jane Doe over time. This reported impact on Jane Doe is consistent with a person who has experienced sexual abuse. Finally, Jane Doe slowly but consistently disclosed Mr. Braaten's identity as the person who had sexually abused her. GRACE found no evidence of a bias or a motive for Jane Doe to falsely accuse Mr. Braaten of sexual abuse.

By contrast, Mr. Braaten has relied almost exclusively on his assertion that he does not know or remember Jane Doe, that he has a long standing career in missions helping youth and vulnerable people, that he has never abused or assaulted anyone, and that his interactions with youth have always been above reproach because he has "been very careful to safeguard and protect [him]self from accusers." In addition, Mr. Braaten claimed he has never been accused of sexual misconduct in the past. However, Mr. Braaten's denial is inconsistent with testimony by a Belizean who specifically recalls Mr. Braaten being angry about being confronted by a Belizean pastor who inquired about accusations that he was the father of a child whose teenage mother had lived in their home. The totality of Mr. Braaten's responses to these matters raise questions about the credibility of his denials regarding Jane Doe's disclosures as well as the other concerns raised relating to possible misconduct.

⁸¹ Hall, M., & Hall, J. (2011). The Long-Term Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Counseling Implications. Retrieved from http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas11/Article_19.pdf. See also Hartman, M., Finn, S., & Leon, G. (1987). Sexual-abuse experiences in a clinical population: Comparisons of familial and nonfamilial abuse. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 24(2), 154-159; and Browne, A., & Finkelhor, D. (1986). Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Review of the Research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 99, 66-77; and Ratican, K. (1992). Sexual Abuse Survivors: Identifying Symptoms and Special Treatment Considerations. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 71(1), 33-38.

⁸² John E.B. Myers, *Evidence In Child Abuse And Neglect Cases*, Third Edition 511 (1997). A number of significant studies have documented the impact of sexual abuse and assault. See Ruth A. Lanius, Eric Vermetten, and Clare Pain, eds. *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chapter 8, *The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare*, 77-87 authored by Vincent J. Felitti and Robert F. Anda. See also The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Injury Prevention and Control: Division of Violence Prevention, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)* <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>, retrieved 7/24/18.

⁸³ Jane Doe explained, "Of course at the time I felt like the guilty one. I remembered he was good, and he was God's man, so if God was here, He was on his side. It felt as if there was something inside me that was just wrong that pulled the crazy out of him. As I was floating off I remember going through things in my mind I may have done. Was I too nice? Was it the time I wore nail polish? Or it was probably just having me around that made him do it. If I wasn't here, he never would hurt anyone, he'd still be a good man and all the bad would be gone."

B. Analysis of Findings Related to SGT's Response to Jane Doe's Disclosures⁸⁴

SGT's initiation of this independent investigation demonstrates its courage and desire to pursue truth,⁸⁵ to understand the dynamics of child sexual abuse disclosures, and to respond appropriately in the face of criminal allegations regarding one of SGT's former employees and currently supported missionaries. As previously noted, GRACE found no evidence that SGT knew or would have known of Jane Doe's reported abuse. SGT nonetheless would benefit from an increased understanding of the dynamics of abuse and offenders so that responses to abuse can be improved moving forward.

Caring for the Wounded

When sexual misconduct allegations emerge within any institution, that institution, particularly one that calls upon the name of Jesus, must take proactive and appropriate steps to care for those who are wounded by it. Undoubtedly, SGT demonstrated care for Jane Doe and her family by initiating this independent investigation and by suspending Mr. Braaten's funding during the pendency of this investigation. However, proactive communications with Jane Doe and her parents would have demonstrated care for Jane Doe during this momentous time because, to date, SGT has not reached out to Jane Doe or her parents directly. The absence of this direct communication with Jane Doe has impacted her⁸⁶ and her parents⁸⁷ in a significant way. Because key leaders such as Elders and the Senior Pastor have the authority to make critical decisions that impact the wounded and the church's response to misconduct, listening to, learning from, and establishing direct lines of communication⁸⁸ about how the church will respond to sexual misconduct is one of the most significant ways churches can demonstrate authentic love and respect for the wounded. In addition, Jane Doe described SGT's handling of these events as "re-traumatizing." In particular, after Pastor Fran reported her disclosure to SGT's Senior Pastor, Jane Doe and others sensed that SGT was dismissive⁸⁹ of her report and took Mr. Braaten's word over hers because SGT did not know her and thought she was "unstable." Only after her relative approached the Senior Pastor about the relationship to Jane Doe did her disclosure gain some traction with SGT leaders. SGT's Senior Pastor likewise affirmed that other information, in addition to Jane Doe's report, caused SGT to take further action on her report.⁹⁰ This response, even though unintentional, communicated to Jane Doe she was not believed, not valued, and that she needed to prove she was not "crazy."⁹¹

⁸⁴ See footnote 40.

⁸⁵ SGT leaders received several calls and emails criticizing SGT for initiating this independent investigation against Ron Braaten. The Senior Pastor told critics via numerous emails that SGT was committed to pursuing truth.

⁸⁶ She explained, "They apologized to [my relatives] but not to me. That has been a little rough from two ends. Not even from the end of apologizing but even for the way it was first handled and for the way that they didn't look much except ask him and then disregarded it. There has been no follow up or apology about that. [My relatives who attend SGT] will talk about how they are being cooperative and it is good. That is because they see that. All I know is that they thought I was crazy and that someone planted this in my brain. The other pastor said he didn't know whose side to be on as if there is really someone to take sides on. Both of those sides are hard that there has been no word on anything at all."

⁸⁷ Jane Doe's mother told GRACE, "I'm sure [SGT] did not know about [the abuse] when it was going on, but they know about it now and there should be some words shared with her. Apology of, I don't know. Just something should have been said to her and to us as parents, because we are really hurting and they have never once contacted us. They've only talked to [relatives who attend SGT] because they're in that church. [Names of relatives]. But nothing ever to us. And that really hurts a lot, and I think they really should have."

⁸⁸ Jane Doe's pastor also stated, "I have a lot of respect for [the SGT Senior Pastor]. But I would suggest... make sure from the outset, that we give immediate and total attention to any suggestion that such a thing could have taken place. I would say to them, probably, calling us in, and sitting face to face, and talking with us would have been [better], and then to get back to us after they spoke to [Mr. Braaten] again, I think a face to face conversation was probably appropriate."

⁸⁹ See footnotes 58 and 62.

⁹⁰ The Senior Pastor stated, "I guess the impetus was either the severity of the accusation was huge to me, and then having [Jane Doe's relatives] being a very strong voice to me. Pastor [Fran] being a very strong voice to me. And then, feeling there was three detectives that were convinced that this was valid. Then the therapist that [Jane Doe] had, and also Pastor [Fran] and their church and her entire family. It was just mounting and I felt like, "Wow, wow. This is not just some young girl who just come up with some crazy ideas. This is a young girl that's really been impacted severely, psychologically and emotionally."

⁹¹ Jane Doe explained, "With the way the church initially responded made me angry, so I had to write it all down so if they still want to say I am crazy and it was put in my head then fine."

A church's inadequate care for the wounded, even when unintentional, creates several significant problems: it puts children and vulnerable individuals at risk; it harms survivors by reinforcing feelings of shame, blame, worthlessness, and helplessness because the church appears to place concerns for the offender over the needs of survivors; it creates a safe haven for abusers, rather than the abused; and it communicates to others, particularly perpetrators, that safety is not the church's highest priority.

Handling Reports of Child Abuse

When Pastor Fran learned of this matter, she told SGT's Senior Pastor in spring 2017. Consequently, the Senior Pastor called Mr. Braaten in Belize and asked him whether or not he had committed sexual abuse. Mr. Braaten denied doing so and the Senior Pastor believed he could do nothing more because Jane Doe had not given permission to provide her name and therefore he could not confront Pastor Braaten with additional details. Pastors must remember, however, that law enforcement is best suited to approach, interview, and investigate potential criminal defendants accused of criminal activity, rather than church personnel. Law enforcement must be immediately informed of potential child abuse so they can evaluate next steps, and this is particularly critical when the accused has ongoing contact with minors. In addition, criminal investigations not only involve strategic decisions about when and how to interview witnesses about abuse disclosures, but may also include forensic evidence collection, such as searching electronic devices or other forms of data that could produce relevant to the investigation.⁹² Child abuse disclosures must be reported to and handled by law enforcement professionals. Doing otherwise can impede the successful prosecution of criminal behavior.

Understanding Abuse and Offender Dynamics

GRACE heard from a number of individuals that Mr. Braaten could not have committed these offenses because they "know his character" and therefore do not believe he committed any crimes or sexual misconduct.⁹³ This type of common response to alleged criminal behavior can have serious consequences such as misconduct being ignored or minimized. Danger can exist when we draw conclusions about a person's private behavior based upon what is known about a person's public persona. As Dr. Diane Langberg explains, "[w]e may think we know people, but God says we do not."⁹⁴ All parents, volunteers, childcare workers, and institutional leaders must understand and remember that "Niceness is a decision... a strategy of social interaction; it is not a character trait."⁹⁵ And, as Dr. Anna Salter explains, deception and secrecy are "the lifeblood of sexual aggression."⁹⁶ Appreciating, therefore, the danger of offenders is even more important for Christian organizations⁹⁷ because "[i]t is precisely our lack of knowledge and understanding that gives predators their edge."⁹⁸ Believing that a person

⁹² Some of these items can be easily tampered with, destroyed, or otherwise made unavailable (such as with social media).

⁹³ For example, a person who provided a written statement told GRACE, "As with just about everyone, my knowledge of the accusations came as a COMPLETE shock and there was NOTHING I knew of Ron that could possibly make this seem true. He had always been an open book, their home always open. I would adamantly like to state that as a result of my relationship with Ron, my knowledge and personal experience over many years, that I stand on my belief that he is not responsible for what he is being accused of. While I have not read the actual written accusation being made, and only going by what Ron and [his wife] have shared with me, my initial impression was that something must have happened to this young lady, but Ron Braaten is being wrongfully accused. From early on I have set out to pray for truth, as I am sure everyone involved has. There really is nothing more I can state in regards to my belief in Ron's innocence.... There is nothing I know of the pastoral staff at the time of Ron's leaving for Africa (which was just after I stopped working full time in the office) that would suggest this could even be possible. Even the details of his assignment in Africa, to go serve with one of the longest standing and greatly respected missionary families SGT supports and partners with suggest this accusation is completely false."

⁹⁴ Diane Langberg, "Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations." See <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b0a335c45776ee022efd309/t/5be936628a922d4a291eb2af/1542010466315/Sexual+Abuse+Within+Christian+Organizations+-+Langberg.pdf>

⁹⁵ Gavin de Becker, *The Gift of Fear* (1997).

⁹⁶ Anna Salter, *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children*, 2003.

⁹⁷ Dr. Anna Salter explains, "One molester, who was himself a minister, said 'I consider church people easy to fool... they have a trust that comes from being Christians... They tend to be better folks all around. And they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people.... I think they want to believe in people. And because of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words.'" *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children*, Anna Salter, 2003.

⁹⁸ *Id.*

we know is capable of sexual misconduct is usually difficult to accept. But, as ugly as these realities can be, pursuing truth through education about abuse⁹⁹ and offender dynamics¹⁰⁰ is one of the best and most important ways we can protect our children and ourselves.

Ongoing churchwide education is a critical investment in SGT's people. Just as SGT maintains its grounds or fixes a broken window, how much more so should engaging in regular safeguarding education be a priority for the ongoing health of any organization committed to preventing abuse and supporting survivors. Educating all demographics of the church body about the dynamics of abuse and the dangers of how offenders operate must be a top and ongoing priority for institutions that serve the vulnerable. An institution's failure to be proactive about these issues means that its people are more vulnerable to exploitation, offenders are not held accountable for known offenses, and SGT risks communicating the message that the church is a safe place for sexual offenders to operate unnoticed. The bottom line is that churches that communicate proactively with the wounded, and are vocal about the realities of abuse by addressing it transparently through education, sermons, support, and care for survivors are communicating a clear message: your pain is not too much for us to bear. You who have survived it will not be forced to survive it alone. Transforming our churches and faith communities into places of refuge for those who have been violated, judged, and marginalized is what the gospel is all about. If God is our refuge, then our churches must be the places where these precious souls find safety and rest.

IV. SPIRITUAL IMPACT AND CONCLUSION

Sexual abuse and how it is addressed impacts victims differently and in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most devastating of these effects flows from the unfathomable harm heaped upon a victim's soul.¹⁰¹ The spiritual

⁹⁹ Considered the "classic study of adult women in the population," (Salter) Dr. Diane Russell found that 28% of women had been molested as children before they reached the age of 14 and 38% of women had been molested before they reached the age of 18. This study included physical contact offenses only (and excluded exhibitionism and nonviolent contact between peers). Of these, only 5% of the child sexual abuse had ever been reported to law enforcement. See Russell (1984; 2000); see also Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith (1990); Salter (1992); Wyatt and Powell (1988). According to various studies, approximately 9% to 16% of boys in the United States are molested before they reach the age of 18. See Badgley (1984); Salter (1992); Timnick (1985a; 1985b). The Finkelhor study found that 33% of women and 42% of men failed to report that they had been sexually assaulted until asked (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith, 1990). Lawson and Chaffin (1992) reported that 57% of children who were interviewed by hospital staff after finding STDs failed to disclose that they had been sexually assaulted.

¹⁰⁰ A number of eye-opening studies have found that the likelihood of sexual offenders having more than one victim is very high. In the late 1980's, Dr. Gene Abel conducted one of the first and most significant studies of sexual offenders. Many consider it "the classic study on undetected sexual offenses." (Anna Salter, *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders: Who They Are, How They Operate, and How We Can Protect Ourselves and Our Children*, Anna Salter, 2003.) In this study, Dr. Abel and his team asked voluntary sex offender clients how many total offenses they had committed. (Notably, to encourage accurate and truthful disclosures, they guaranteed confidentiality in a number of ways: the interviewers did not have the subject's names; researchers obtained a federal certificate of confidentiality that prevented the results from being subpoenaed into any federal court in the country; and the master list was kept outside the country in any case.) In the study, researchers interviewed a total of 561 offenders about sexual offenses which included exhibitionism, voyeurism, adult rape, and child molestation. These 561 offenders admitted to more than 291,000 sexual offenses of all kinds and more than 195,000 victims. A smaller group of men who were composed only of 232 child molesters admitted attempting more than 55,000 incidents of molestation. Of these, they claimed they had been successful in 38,000 of these incidents. This group of 232 men reported having more than 17,000 total victims. Men who molested out-of-home female children averaged 20 victims. Men who molested out-of-home male children averaged 150 victims each. Most of these offenses had never been detected. Abel computed the chances of being caught for a sexual offense was at 3%. Gene Abel, et al., *Self-Reported Sex Crimes on Nonincarcerated Paraphiliacs*, 2(1) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 3-25 (1987). A number of other studies report similar results: an "iceberg of undocumented offenses beneath the tip of official records" (Weinrott and Saylor, 1991); Emerick and Dutton, 1993); (Janes, 1993); (Underwood, Patch, Cappelletty, and Wolfe, 1999).

¹⁰¹ Jane Doe's friend told GRACE, "It was hard for [Jane Doe], because she struggled so many years, with having to tell this, and then she tells, and then she was afraid that she would say that he had done something to her and nobody would believe her, because he was so well respected, and they really thought he was such a good person that they wouldn't believe these allegations. And then once that was- that they did tell the church, that's exactly what happened. They didn't do anything, they didn't take the allegations seriously. So that was very hard for [Jane Doe].... It hurt her that they wouldn't take the allegations seriously. It gave her a real distrust in the church. I'm just something that she struggled with, for that. They didn't do anything.... It's definitely impacted her with her spirituality as far as believing, wondering if this is- How can a church that talks about God, and all these wanting to seek justice and everything, could find out allegations like this and then not do anything about it. Yeah, it definitely impacted her spiritually." In addition, Jane Doe's mother described to GRACE, Jane Doe "still loves God" however, "going to church is the hardest place to be because there's too many people and she has this anxiety and fear in large crowds.... So she knows that [Mr. Braaten] would not be allowed to come in, but she just has this fear of large crowds of people and not being able to see the doors. See our doors are behind us. We enter into the church building, and the door is there, and then we go sit down,

impact upon a person who is abused by an offender who is a professing Christian is profound. In explaining this tragic dynamic, Dr. Diane Langberg writes, “God is viewed through the lens of abuse. Who he is and what he thinks about the survivor is understood based upon who Daddy was, or Mommy, or a grandfather, or a Youth Director, or whoever. They have learned about love, trust, hope, faith, through the experience of sexual abuse. They have also learned about the unseen through the visible. The ins and outs of ordinary life have taught them many lessons about who they think God is.”¹⁰² Often the impact of how the church responds negatively impacts victims more than the abuse itself.¹⁰³ Sexual abuse is a devastating crime that impacts the personal and spiritual lives of victims forevermore. Disclosures of sexual abuse must, therefore, be handled with great care and wisdom, especially within the Christian community that values both body and soul. If victims are to be well served, rather than re-victimized upon disclosures of sexual abuse, both the physical impact and the spiritual impact of this offense must be clearly understood by Christian institutions. Those in leadership positions must grasp the critical importance of protecting and serving the vulnerable, as well as advocating for the wounded who are in their care.

Holy Scripture teaches us that the very nature of Jesus is defined as both truth and light.¹⁰⁴ As children of God, we are each called to live in truth and light, both personally and institutionally. The failure to protect and properly address these offenses fails to reflect the love and truth of Jesus. We commend SGT for demonstrating a commitment for both truth and light by courageously initiating this Independent Investigation.

If SGT continues to respond to this investigation with a teachable spirit and a genuine commitment for change, it will reflect a transformative love that is able to liberate and heal the individuals who have been affected by these matters, as well as the greater SGT community.

Respectfully on this 20th Day of May, 2019.

GRACE

doors behind us so she can't see who's coming in or out. So that gives her high anxiety. So anyway, when she's in the church building, she has a lot of anxiety, and she has terrible migraine headaches, and she shakes. So she had to back out of [church] ministry. She did that for a few years, but then she had to back out.... She just doesn't understand why God didn't keep her safe when she was just a little child. That's her main thing. Where was He? That was my thing too is, I had a period of time I was very angry. Why didn't God keep her safe? What was going on? Why? But I know God is good, and all things work together for good, and somehow He's going to take this, and I've already seen how he is. Look at all the people she's helped. All these children, [name of child], and so many people that she has helped because of her understanding of pain, of emotional pain.”

¹⁰² Diane Langberg, *The Spiritual Impact of Sexual Abuse* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2017), p. 6.

¹⁰³ Jane Doe told GRACE, “There is definitely the spiritual confusion and how that interrelates with how [SGT] handled it. That made it a little bit worse. Thank God I have my church and they have been supportive and completely there for me and everything. But I would never leave my church because I don't trust anybody else out there who says they are Christian. There is the church aspect and the God aspect but I have worked through the God aspect a little bit more.”

¹⁰⁴ See John 14:6 and John 8:12.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. GRACE recommends SGT leadership outline a plan demonstrating authentic repentance (i.e., actions and words)¹⁰⁵ addressed to Jane Doe and her family.
2. GRACE recommends SGT leadership pay for outside counseling for Jane Doe and her family related to her reported sexual abuse.
3. GRACE recommends SGT leadership make a decision regarding funding for Ron Braaten and Oasis Ministry in Belize. This decision should consider including an option to redirect this funding to reimburse Jane Doe for counseling and medical expenses related to her reported sexual abuse.
4. GRACE recommends SGT end all mission trips to Belize in connection with Oasis Ministry and Ron Braaten.
5. GRACE recommends SGT engage child protection experts to provide child safeguarding training to all volunteers, church goers, church leaders, and for all missionaries and their families who are supported or sent by SGT.
6. GRACE recommends SGT leadership provide this report to the Oasis Ministry Board of Directors and to the Board of Directors for Camp Cedarbrook in the Adirondacks (formerly known as Camp Cherith).
7. GRACE recommends SGT leadership provide this report to each church and organization that financially supports Ron Braaten's ministry.
8. GRACE recommends SGT encourage Oasis Ministry in Belize to initiate an independent investigation of Oasis Ministry by child protection experts.
9. GRACE recommends SGT complete a screening check¹⁰⁶ of every person engaged in childcare and youth work at SGT who has contact with individuals 17 years of age or younger. Screening checks should also be conducted for all missionaries currently supported or sent by SGT. Such a screening includes more than just a criminal background check and should be developed with the assistance of law enforcement and child protection experts.¹⁰⁷
10. GRACE recommends SGT leadership discuss ways SGT can have transparent and healthy conversations that address all forms of abuse including sexual abuse, family violence, non-physical/verbal abuse, and its effects on children and vulnerable adults. This includes seeking out regular opportunities to listen to and serve SGT's abuse survivors.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Repentance, when founded on truth and humility, is best illustrated by: 1) empathy for those who have been wronged and damaged by sin and failures, 2) an awareness that the offense is against the goodness and holiness of God, not merely a behavior that hurt others, and 3) a desire to make restitution. Words of apology, though good and necessary, are not sufficient evidence of a true turning away from prior wrongdoing. Authentic repentance will be demonstrated by an equally authentic transformation over a period of time where individuals and institutions work to ensure future behaviors no longer harm others. This definition is adapted from an article written by Diane Langberg. See "An Inward Look (Part One and Part Two)," *Christian Counseling Today*, Vol. 9 No. 2 (2001).

¹⁰⁶ Screening checks include a criminal background check, a references check, an interview, and checking publicly available sources such as Google and social media outlets (for example, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, Snapchat, etc.).

¹⁰⁷ In advance of conducting criminal background checks, SGT needs to be prepared to deal with the revelation that some employees, missionaries, and/or volunteers may have a criminal history. A safeguarding committee should determine and set objective standards establishing what degree of prior misconduct would disqualify a person from serving in a formal role at SGT. For example, if a current or prospective employee or volunteer background check revealed they had a prior arrest for abuse, how would SGT deal with this matter? Also, consider, arrest does not necessarily equate to conviction. If the criminal history record does not provide the case disposition, then further inquiry with the prosecuting agency and/or clerk of court will need to be made to determine if there was a conviction, and if so, on what charge as some cases are pled to lesser offenses than originally charged for various reasons which occasionally deal with factors unassociated with the defendant's guilt or innocence. An objective, cautious approach must be taken when evaluating this information and taking action based upon it. Make certain SGT has all available information from the record.

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 100. Approximately 20% of church goers are survivors of sexual abuse.

11. GRACE recommends SGT leadership engage child protection experts to conduct an audit of SGT policies¹⁰⁹ and procedures relevant to sexual misconduct and make appropriate revisions. Policy audits must be conducted with a commitment to best practices and an appreciation for trauma, including the spiritual impact of maltreatment.

12. GRACE recommends SGT create a Safeguarding Committee that will:

- o Work with leadership in implementing these recommendations and addressing any other needs as they arise. The Safeguarding Committee must include at least one survivor¹¹⁰ of sexual abuse at all times as well as a community partner, such as a law enforcement officer, prosecutor, or a Child Protective Services caseworker.
- o Be a support ministry for survivors of sexual abuse.
- o Receive trauma-informed training. This training must include a commitment to best practices and an appreciation for all forms of trauma, including the spiritual impact of abuse.
- o Facilitate ongoing sexual abuse and offender dynamics training for all new and existing employees and for every demographic of the church body (all leaders, volunteers, congregants, parents, and for children in age-appropriate ways) and for SGT's supported and sent missionaries and their families.
- o Track attendance and completion of training modules.
- o Report all sexual misconduct violations to law enforcement and then to SGT leadership.
- o Review sexual misconduct policies¹¹¹ annually and revise as needed.
- o Engage community partners who work in the field of abuse.
- o Engage child protection experts to conduct a physical property inspection and evaluate facilities for potential blind spots or other safety concerns.
- o Review churchwide resources (for example, in a cafe/store, library, and online) to be sure that materials exist for individuals impacted by abuse. This should include books¹¹² and links to *appropriate* counseling in which a licensed clinician is able to provide evidence-based therapy and, within that setting, to also address the spiritual impact of maltreatment.

¹⁰⁹ “When writing a church policy on child maltreatment, for example, the preamble must remind readers that these policies are not being done to avoid litigation or reduce our insurance rate—but because children are Christ’s representatives (Mark 9:36-37) and we intend to treat them with the respect due messengers of God.” Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018).

¹¹⁰ Some of the best experts in the area of sexual abuse are survivors because of the fact they have endured these painful dynamics. Listening to them is one of the most important components in abuse prevention. As many survivors explain, “if you haven’t experienced it, it’s hard to understand.” This sentiment underscores the importance of asking survivors to lead and allowing their voices to be heard. So many of these “overcomers” understand all too well the dynamics of secrecy, shame, blame, loss, grief, reasons for delayed disclosures, grooming tactics, the misuse of power, deception, and so very much more. Survivors can be incredibly intuitive and are often the first to recognize the danger signs of abuse, and the church is therefore wise to listen to them.

¹¹¹ Policies should include a specific action plan with concrete steps regarding how SGT will handle allegations of sexual misconduct when it arises.

¹¹² E.g., Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro: New Growth Press 2015).



Dear Members of Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle:

On Monday, May 20, 2019, we received the Executive Summary Report from GRACE, the professional company we hired to carry out an independent investigation of the charges of sexual abuse and misconduct made against Ron Braaten, a former youth pastor, which allegedly occurred 25 years ago.

After many months of this professional company conducting an independent, thorough, and detailed investigation, their Summary Report declared:

The GRACE report found the accusations against Ron Braaten from this woman to be credible. The report also indicated that the investigation brought to light additional accusations against Ron Braaten both here in the States and in Belize.

GRACE did not find any evidence that the SGT leadership knew about the alleged abuse or any other allegations of sexual misconduct against Ron Braaten during the time he was SGT's youth pastor.

Based upon these findings and considering these results, the SGT Combined Board has made these three decisions:

- We will immediately end our affiliation with and our financial support of Ron Braaten as well as ending his status as an SGT missionary.
- We will encourage the Executive Board of Oasis, Ron Braaten's ministry, to commence an investigation of his ministry presently operating in the country of Belize, and to make a determination of whether the Belizean authorities should become involved.
- We are presently exploring what we can do to work with the local church of this woman to provide for her professional help and counsel.

We are asking the SGT church family, as well as all other churches and ministries associated with this matter, to keep all those impacted by these recent findings and decisions in earnest prayer.

Sincerely in Christ,

The Combined Board

Investigate sex charge for church

By DAVID AMBRO

Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle Church on Brookside Drive in Smithtown is conducting an independent investigation into an allegation of sexual misconduct by its former pastor of youth ministry, Ron Braaten, who left the church 22 years ago.

According to Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle Senior Pastor Gary Zarlengo, a 30-year old woman who is currently a parishioner in another Smithtown church, alleges that 25 years ago, when she was five years old, she was sexually abused by Pastor Braaten, who was the youth pastor of the church at the time.

Pastor Zarlengo said the woman brought her allegations to the Suffolk County District Attorney's office and to police detectives but that the criminal investigation stalled because it was so long ago. He said, though, that the pastor of the church where the woman now attends contacted him about the allegation and asked if he would look further into the charges.

In response to the request, Pastor Zarlengo said Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle leadership agreed to conduct an independent investigation of the allegations.

During a telephone interview Tuesday, November 27 from Belize in Central America, where he is the founder of and involved with Oasis Ministry, Pastor Braaten denied any wrongdoing while he was in Smithtown. He is aware an investigation is underway by the church but said he has not read any of the information posted on the church website about it because it is untrue.

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Pastor Braaten also knows that a woman has made a specific allegation of sexual misconduct against him but he said it is unfounded. "I am absolutely innocent," he said. "I haven't done anything wrong. There is no truth to this and I have nothing else to say."

Pastor Braaten has long been involved in the church. In 1956 his father's uncle, Wesley Braaten, was one of the founding pastors of the church. Ron Braaten then served during the 1990s as its youth pastor. He said Tuesday that he left the church in 1996 for a mission in Africa and he then founded Oasis and has been in Belize for the past decade.

The church has retained Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE), of Lynchburg, Virginia, to conduct an independent investigation into the woman's allegations specifically and into the way the situation has been handled by the church. On the homepage of the church website, sgtchurc.org, there is a link to an online survey being conducted by GRACE related to its investigation.

The church website does not mention Mr. Braaten by name, but the GRACE survey does, asking respondents if they know him and if they are aware of any issues related to sexual misconduct by him.

"In order for the investigation to be thorough and comprehensive, GRACE relies on the voluntary cooperation and assistance of any and all individuals who may possess relevant information," says the church website. "Without this part of the process, it would be impossible for them to uncover the necessary information fundamental to the investigation. GRACE has ensured us that the process will be comfortable, informal, and confidential."

Online survey inquires about sexual misconduct charge

leadership that the findings of the investigation should be completed by January to February 2019, but otherwise the investigation is being conducted totally independent of the church.

GRACE founder and Chief Executive Officer Basye "Bos" Tchividjian is overseeing the investigation, which is being conducted by two female attorneys at the organization. GRACE bills itself as the leading evangelical organization specializing in awareness, education, and investigation of sexual abuse handling by religious organizations.

Pastor Zarlengo said hiring GRACE to conduct the investigation is expensive but it gives church leadership a high level of confidence that the investigation will be undertaken with a high level of objectivity.

"We are trying to approach this in a Godly and Christian way," Pastor Zarlengo said. "You have to take every allegation seriously."

According to Pastor Zarlengo, because the alleged incident occurred so long ago this is not a criminal investigation. He added, however, that the church leadership intends to act very decisively upon the recommendations of GRACE once the investigation is completed.

"I did not want this to stain us in a negative light," he said. "We love and appreciate Ron and Linda Braaten and support their missionary efforts, but we take this very seriously, which is why we decided to undertake an independent investigation."

Before becoming the senior pastor 20 years ago, Pastor Zarlengo spent a decade as a junior pastor and he was there when Ron Braaten was the youth pastor. He said that he has vehemently denied the allegations and so far as the church knows no other allegations of sexual misconduct have been made against him.

"No one has ever made any

allegations against him in the time he was the youth pastor or in the mission field, so this took him by surprise," Pastor Zarlengo said.

The GRACE survey linked to the church website is being carried out on the website Survey mMoney. There is an introduction and instructions, then respondents can respond to a dozen questions with an option to provide their names or to remain anonymous.

"This confidential survey is part of an independent investigation related to allegations of sexual misconduct by Ron Braaten and a review of the responses by Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle to such allegations," says the GRACE introduction. "GRACE shall investigate any and all known allegations of sexual misconduct by Ron Braaten, including but not limited to, whether Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle had any knowledge of such allegations and if so, how Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle responded to such allegations."

According to GRACE, the purpose of the survey is to 1) collect any and all relevant information consistent with the scope of this investigation, and 2) assist GRACE in identifying individuals with relevant information related to this investigation who can be interviewed.

"GRACE alone has access to these survey responses and survey responses will not be reviewed by Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle or by any entity apart from GRACE," says the introduction. "Please know that the information provided by survey respondents within the survey itself may be used in the Executive Summary provided to Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle. However, the identity of survey respondents shall be kept strictly confidential and will not be voluntarily disclosed to Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle, or to any third party without the written permission of the individual survey respondent."

Details of the investigation were shared with the Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle congregation September 23 by Senior Pastor Gary Zarlengo. During an interview Tuesday, the pastor said this is a very difficult situation for the church because there is a great deal of love and appreciation for Ron and his wife Linda Braaten and the work they did at the church and are doing in their current ministry. He added, though, that the allegations have to be taken seriously which is why the church hired GRACE to conduct the independent investigation.

Pastor Zarlengo said he has no knowledge of how the GRACE investigation is unfolding. He said GRACE has advised the church

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Ex-Pastor sex abuse confirmed

By DAVID AMBRO

An independent investigation has determined that allegations of sexual abuse of children by former Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle Youth Pastor Ronald Braaten are credible and more widespread than originally believed, according to information disclosed to **The Smithtown News** last week by Church Pastor Gary Zarlengo.

A 30-year-old Smithtown woman, the identity of whom has been kept confidential, came forward last year and alleged that when she was five to seven years old she was sexually abused by Mr. Braaten. She brought the allegations to the attention of law enforcement, but because it was so long ago a criminal investigation was not launched.

The pastor of the church where the victim is now a parishioner contacted Pastor Zarlengo last year and asked him to look into the allegations further. In response, the leadership of Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle (SGT), which is on Brookside Drive and also operates a parochial school, retained Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE), of Lynchburg, Virginia, to conduct an independent investigation into the allegations and into the way the church handled the situation.

GRACE has completed its investigation and submitted an executive summary report to Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle elders Monday, May 20. The church sent a letter to its members last week, a copy of which was provided by Pastor Zarlengo to **The NEWS** Friday, May 24, outlining the findings. Pastor Zarlengo also intended to discuss the report with parishioners from the pulpit at mass Sunday, May 26.

"The GRACE report," according to the letter sent by the church to its members, "found the

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Sexual abuse charges against ex-youth pastor found credible

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accusations against Ron Braaten from this woman to be credible. The report also indicated that the investigation brought to light additional accusations against Ron Braaten both in the States and in Belize.

GRACE began its work in September 2018 by conducting an online survey posted on the church website in which it identified Mr. Braaten and asked for other victims to come forward. The survey, according to church officials, resulted in 228 responses, and the GRACE investigators followed up with 48 personal interviews.

"Most of them were positive but those that were not were very sobering," Pastor Zarlengo said.

According to Pastor Zarlengo, the GRACE investigation concluded that the responses of Mr. Braaten's accuser are consistent and credible while the responses of Mr. Braaten are inconsistent, questionable and flawed.

Although the initial allegation about Mr. Braaten's conduct occurred 25 years ago, it is possible as a result of the Child Victim's Act enacted by the New York State Legislature in January and signed into law by Governor Andrew Cuomo February 14 that Mr. Braaten can now be brought to justice for his alleged crimes. Prosecution of the Braaten case will be difficult, though, because he has resided out of the country for more than two decades and is currently living in Unitedville, Belize.

Pastor Zarlengo said the victim is aware of the change in law and

is considering her options with the church she is currently attending. He said the church also contacted Mr. Braaten and his wife Linda Braaten about the findings in the GRACE report and he continues to maintain that he is being wrongly accused.

Mr. Braaten's family helped establish the church in the 1950s and he was the youth pastor from 1983 to 1997. Mr. and Mrs. Braaten left Smithtown in 1996 for a mission in Tanzania, Africa where they spent several years. They then founded the Oasis Ministry in Belize, which is a disputed territory of Guatemala in Central America. Although out of the country, Mr. Braaten has remained a Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle missionary funded by the local church.

Contacted in Belize by **The NEWS** November 27, 2018 for a story about the GRACE investigation, Mr. Braaten denied any wrongdoing. "I am absolutely innocent," he said. "I haven't done anything wrong. There is no truth to this and I have nothing else to say."

Mr. Braaten did not return telephone calls this week for comment about the GRACE findings.

Pastor Zarlengo declined a request by **The NEWS** for a copy of the GRACE report. "The Executive Summary Report prepared for us by the independent investigating company GRACE is a very lengthy and detailed report specifically prepared for the core leadership of Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle as well as the victim

and her precious family," he said in an email. "Because of its personal content and the nature of the specific details contained in it we would have to gain specific permission from the young woman, her family, as well as obtaining our own legal counsel; therefore, at this point in time, we must honor her privacy, as well as her family's by not releasing the contents of this investigative report."

The victim who initiated the GRACE investigation of Mr. Braaten, might not even meet the new statute of limitations periods in the Child Victims Act signed into law in February because it still has age restriction. The law, however, has a one year window of opportunity from August 14, 2019 to August 14, 2020 in which victims can bring charges against their abusers without any statute of limitations. During that period, therefore, Mr. Braaten can face charges and lawsuits by his victims.

While the GRACE investigation found the story of the victim to be consistent and credible and concluded that there are other accusations against Mr. Braaten, the investigation clears the church of any impropriety. "GRACE did not find any evidence that the Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle leadership knew about the alleged abuse or any other allegations of sexual misconduct against Ron Braaten during the time he was Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle's youth pastor," says the letter released by the church last week.

According to the letter, based upon

the GRACE report the Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle Combined Board, which includes elders, deacons and trustees, has made three decisions. They are:

- "We will immediately end our affiliation with and our financial support of Ron Braaten as well as ending his status as a Smithtown Gospel Tabernacle missionary."

- "We will encourage the executive board of Oasis Ministry, Ron Braaten's ministry, to commence an investigation of his ministry presently operating in the country of Belize, and to make a determination of whether the Belizean authorities should become involved."

- "We are presently exploring what we can do to work with the local church of this [victim] to provide for her professional help and counsel."

"We are asking the Smithtown Gospel Church family, as well as all other churches and ministries associated with this matter, to keep all those impacted by these recent findings and decisions in earnest prayer," the church letter concludes.

Pastor Zarlengo said this week that when the church received the initial complaint about Mr. Braaten last year it suspended the monthly contribution it makes to Oasis Ministry. Now that contribution will be terminated.

Pastor Zarlengo also emphasized this week that for the past 13 years the church has had an extensive sophisticated, and detailed child protection protocol in place to prevent situations such as this.